

Governors Palace (Reconstructed)
Williamsburg
James City County
Virginia

HABS No. VA 327

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

GOVERNOR'S PALACE
Williamsburg, James City County, Virginia

Owner: Williamsburg Restoration

Date of erection: 1705 and 1751

Builders: Henry Cary (first phase); John Blair and Richard Taliaferro (second phase)

Architect: Not known

Present condition: Good, rebuilt; only foundations original

Description:

The main house is two stories below a high deck-on-hip roof on which rests a tall two-story cupola. There are two main dependencies a story and a half high, with steep gable roofs and end chimneys. These enclose the forecourt and are spaced one hundred feet apart. They are joined to the house by curtain walls with crenelated copings. The superstructure of the house was destroyed in the fire of 1781, but the dependencies stood until Civil War times. They are said to have been demolished then for their materials, which possibly went into the building of Fort McGruder near Williamsburg. Photographs and the foundations (which survived) permitted an authentic rebuilding of the dependencies. A drawing of the Palace, probably made for William Byrd's History of the Dividing Line, was engraved and the plate found in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England, in 1929 or 1930. This also showed the dependencies, as well as the main building. The Bodleian plate, together with a plan by Thomas Jefferson and the excavated artifacts and foundations, formed the basis of the rebuilding.

The main block is 54 by 60 and is five bays wide and four deep. In the rear the Ball Room wing, added in 1751, conceals the original fenestration, but it is assumed to have been identical with the front. The facade, or south front, has a center door with two windows on either side. The two closest the door are grouped to it, the others being widely separated. Above the front door is a window with hinged panels below, opening onto a balcony. On the east side the four windows on each floor are symmetrically spaced. On the west side the symmetry is disturbed by a door in the second bay from the right. This was the service door between the kitchen and the dining room. The lower windows are three lights wide and eight lights high and the upper three and seven. The glazing of the windows was not shown on the

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Bodleian plate but, as restored, is characteristic of the period. The heights of the openings were obtained largely from dimensions given by Jefferson for the stool height of the windows and the ceiling heights of the rooms. This might have varied according to the level of the window head. The possible variation, however, was reduced to a few inches by the discovery of a fallen fragment of a brick window-arch. This showed the full depth of the flat arch with its jointing and skew-back as well as a section of the string course above, thus relating the window head to the second-floor line. The arches of the upper windows are presumed to have come to the bottom of the main cornice. The widening of the center second-story window, while conjectural, is preceded by Rosewell, in Gloucester County. The hinged panels under the window, allowing egress to the balcony, were referred to in the eighteenth-century records of the Palace, when the hinges were changed to swing out instead of in.

The design of the main cornice is conjectural but characteristic of the period. The five dormers on the roof line with the windows below are of the hipped-roof type shown in the plate. The balustrade around the deck was designed after that on the Bodleian plate, but instead of the inverted-vase type shown thereon a typical turned baluster was used. The cupola follows in design that shown on the plate, and the trim was kept as simple as possible, as none showed in the drawing. The only departure from the evidence was in the use of a weathervane modeled after one of those at "The Mulberry" in Berkeley County, South Carolina, instead of the pennon type used so much in contemporary English architecture.

The brickwork of the Palace is laid in Flemish bond in accordance with a sample of walling that was found embedded in the ground to the west of the building. This not only gave the bonding but also the color and texture of the brick and of the mortar joint, and the profile of the latter. The foundation of the front and side stair were found, together with fragments of the stone. The new steps are of Portland stone to match the old.

Of the elevations of the Ball Room wing no representations remain. Jefferson showed it on his plan, and the foundations largely survived. Aside from plan and spacing of windows the elevations are conjectural. The present gable roof with pediment end was designed in 1931 to be almost a true Classic pitch, but the ridge was raised, occasioning the high pediment end. The coat-of-arms in the gable are purely conjectural but are preceded by other buildings, such as Holden Chapel, Harvard University, The Officers' Club, Bridgetown, Barbados, several public buildings in Cape Town, Union of South Africa, where particularly fine renderings of the Royal Arms occur (see Pearse, Early Buildings of Cape Colony), and many examples in England. The cut and

moulded doorway is inspired by those at Rosewell and an example at Enfield in England. The wood roll-moulding is a copy of a fragment found at Rosewell that escaped the fire. The windows and all interior trim ~~is~~ conjectural. The narrow rear platform was indicated by a foundation wall and by documentary evidence that spoke of the benches on the back porch. The pierced wrought-iron newels are copied from one found at the College building. The interiors of the main building are also conjectural except the mantels, of which the design is based on fragments found in the excavations. From these, two actual mantel designs could be deduced, one being the white and pink mantel in the southeast parlor and one the marble facing of the southwest dining room. The former is formed of pilasters and a frieze inlaid with pink marble, the latter containing in the center a inlaid panel. The facing is lavender pink in the dining room with a cream fluted keystone. Pieces of the key and the adjacent facing were found. The mantels in the hall and State Dining Room employ old profiles found in the excavations, but the fragments were so incomplete as to prevent a reassembling of the designs. That of the latter is based on the mantel in the East Room of the Peachy-Randolph house.

The plan of the Palace was preserved in both the foundations themselves and in Jefferson's drawing. It is extremely unusual and is preceded only in Ashburnham House in London. The Palace now has a central hall extending half way through the building, with a square room on either side. The hall leads to a large stair hall in the rear in which the stair ascends to the west. It is constructed between a powder room and pantry and therefore does not have one side free as usual but rises between paneled walls. To the east of the stair hall is the State Dining Room, the largest room except for the Ball Room and Supper Room in the wing. The right-hand partition in the entrance hall had no foundation, and this may once have been a large salon as at Shirley. The use of the rooms and a list of their furnishings is contained in the Inventory of the estate of Lord Botetourt, next to last Royal Governor of Virginia.

There was no evidence for the trim of the dependencies, and all is new except the antique mantels in the east building. These were formerly in the Hancock House in Culpeper County, where they extended the full height of the room, obviating the present double cornices. The front doors are designed after those at Four Mile Tree in Surry County. Under the east building the remains of a small vaulted room was found, perhaps for government documents.

The Bodleian Plate apparently showed the Palace before the alterations of 1749-51. It showed the forecourt wall, as excavated, with curved returns from the gateposts and again to the

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advance buildings. The wrought-iron gates and gatepiers and finials can be seen in the drawing, as well as the wall. The latter does not tally with the early records, which specify a wood balustrade above the wall. The omission in the plate may have been due to difficulties in drafting.

Author:

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Approved:

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